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ABSTRACT

Study skills are acquired abilities; they are processes for learning. They can and must be taught in elementary school classrooms. This is best done through activities which are integrated and practiced in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers can start teaching study skills with the three lesson plans on listening, notetaking, and testing that are provided in this publication. Provided in each plan are rationale, teaching methods, and activities. (RH)

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STUDY SKILLS: THE INDEPENDENT LEARNER

Catherine D. Tobin

Children can be taught how to study! Children can be taught how to learn!

John Naisbitt, the author of *Megatrends* (Warner Books, 1982), said that in this information age, it's important that education emphasize T.L.C.--that is, that students learn how to *Think*, learn how to *Learn*, and learn to be *Creative*. It's not enough simply to feed children a steady diet of facts and figures; we can teach them how to be students who know how to study, who take responsibility for their own learning.

> In most schools, the teaching of study skills is haphazard and unplanned.
>
> Recommendation: Instruction in *effective study* and work skills, which are *essential* if school and independent time is to be used efficiently, should be introduced in the *early grades* and continued throughout the student's schooling.
>
> *A NATION AT RISK*
> Report of the National Commission
> on Excellence in Education 1983

Yes, we are teaching some study skills now, but we could be doing more.

> When polled about problems they expect during high school, ninth graders anticipate a "big problem" improving study habits (24%), second only to pressure to get good grades (42%).
>
> *COLLEGE BOARD REPORT 1982-83*

WHAT ARE STUDY SKILLS?

We can define study skills as learned abilities for acquiring knowledge or competence. A broader definition is that they are processes for learning. Some of the more common study skills are: listening, building vocabulary, using a textbook, doing homework, problem solving, taking a test, following directions, using resources, planning time, taking notes, and preparing for a test.

Study skills are developmental in nature. They can't be learned and then stored away intact for future use the way one might deal with a scientific fact or a date in history. Children must keep developing and refining them from one grade to the next. N. Lovell and L. Kennedy, writing in the *nassp Bulletin* for April, 1984, have this to say about study skills: "They are never mastered in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, pupils need to practice such skills on continuously more difficult materials and content as they progress through the grade levels. Each school year demands acquisition of more sophistication in applying the study skills to the new content."

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This means, of course, that we must begin teaching study skills in the early grades and continue teaching them as long as the child is in school. There simply isn't a cut-off point when we can say that study skills no longer have to be learned.

Nor is there a cut-off point when it comes to various content areas of the curriculum. The listening skills learned in math class are the same listening skills used when studying science or language arts. For this reason, study skills should be integrated into all areas of the curriculum.

All too often, children believe that the note-taking skills they learn while studying English differ somehow from those used in social studies or science; that there are five or six different note-taking skills they must learn if they wish to apply them all in their school work. How much easier it will be for the children (and for us) if we show them that the skill or problem solving which was introduced in today's social studies class can be applied in tomorrow's math class.

NEED AND VALUE

It's highly important when teaching study skills that children step back and take a look at the way they learn. They must also understand that they have responsibility for their own learning. Finally, they must see a need and value for the particular skill they're learning.

There are ways you can demonstrate all three points to your children. Here, for example, is the way I approach the skill of note-taking:

I set up a classroom situation by telling the children that they have fifteen minutes to take notes on some material in their textbook. I also tell them that a week from today they will be given a short quiz in which they may use the notes they have taken. After the quiz, I ask the children, "How did your notes work? Did you take too many notes? Too few notes? Could you read them?" I conclude by saying, "We're going to do the same thing again next week."

With this activity, I make it obvious to the students that there's a need for taking notes, and that there's a certain value attached to the notes they've taken. But something more has been accomplished: Not only have I asked the students to look at the way they learn. I've also asked them to evaluate their own work. The responsibility for judgment is on their shoulders.

The classroom climate for teaching study skills should be flexible. Students should have the opportunity to work in small groups, individually, and as a whole class. Personally, I like to have the students work in small groups when the task is new. At such times, children frequently lack confidence that they can work individually. The group's suggestions and insights can go a long way toward bolstering a student's confidence.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Since children learn by doing, teachers must set up classroom activities which give children the opportunity to practice study skills in the teacher's presence. In this way, teachers can evaluate the children's strengths and weaknesses. However, classroom activities can only take the student so far. Sooner or later, each student must use his or her acquired study skills independently, without supervision.

How often do students either neglect to turn in homework or do it incorrectly? The question is really: Can the student work in an unsupervised situation? Does he or she know how to follow written directions? Does the student have confidence in his or her ability to follow directions and be successful?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions. Nor will the questions be answered overnight. It will take years before the child really knows the correct way to study--and even then, there'll probably be room for improvement.

Study skills are acquired abilities; they are processes for learning. They can and must be taught in the classroom. This is best done through activities which are integrated and practiced in all areas of the curriculum. Our goal is the independent learner who can take responsibility for his or her own learning. This cannot be accomplished unless each student has the necessary study skills.

I've selected three study skills to get you involved. I've given the rationale, teaching methods and activities for each of the skills. Why not start today incorporating them into your classroom? You have my promise that you'll be glad you did! Besides the benefits to your students, you'll find the skills really make your job easier...and that's what we're all about: teachers helping teachers.

LISTENING

Many people think that hearing and listening are synonymous, but that is not the case. Hearing is a natural ability, while listening is an acquired skill. It is one of the most important study skills, because listening is the primary communication activity used in the classroom. Being a good listener does not just happen. Students need to be taught good listening skills from the beginning of their formal schooling, and they need to have these skills continually reinforced through practice.

A good way to begin practice for listening skills is the following activity. Stress that the activity will not be graded. Its purpose is to help the students better understand how easy it is to miss important information when they don't focus their attention. Explain that you are going to test listening skills, and you will ask the question only one time.

Questions for Good Listeners

1. Do they have a fourth of July in France?
2. How many birthdays does the average woman have?
3. Why can't a woman living in Lexington, Kentucky be buried west of the Mississippi?
4. A farmer in Montana had forty sheep. In a blizzard, all but nine died. How many does he have left?
5. Is it legal in California for a man to marry his widow's sister?
6. Some months have 31 days; some have 30. How many have 28?
7. A plane crashed on the border between the United States and Mexico, in fact, right in the middle of the Rio Grande. In which country would the survivors be buried?

Answers

1. Yes.
2. One.
3. A woman who is living can't be buried.
4. Nine.
5. A man who has a widow is dead.
6. Twelve.
7. Survivors are alive.

Stop after the first three. Go over the questions and their answers. You are not repeating by doing this. You are simply giving those children who are having difficulty a chance to catch up

and to better understand what is required of them, so that they have a greater chance for success with the rest of the exercise.

Go over the answers orally and discuss why people got wrong answers. Did they focus on only a part of the question, rather than the whole question? Did they jump to conclusions as a result of not listening carefully? Have the students think about how they listened, and why that might have contributed to getting a wrong answer. Get them to talk about it, for in order to learn a skill, it is important to understand how we do it. What are the processes we go through when we listen?

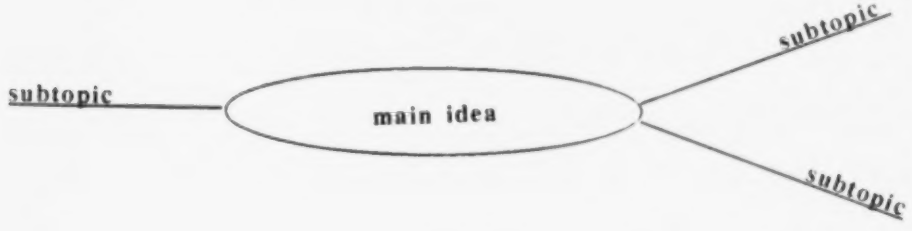
NOTETAKING

Students from the upper elementary grades on need to know how to take notes about what they hear and read. Usually, note-taking skills are introduced around fifth grade, refined through high school and college and the pace of instruction differs according to student needs at a particular time.

Mapping has become a big favorite with students and teachers because it is both flexible and versatile. It can be used for organized information and for such unorganized information as class discussions. More importantly, all students of all ability levels, even the lowest, experience success with it.

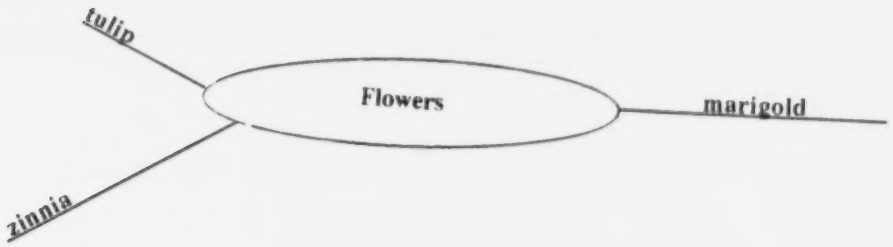
The first activity with mapping fits in best right after categorizing. Explain that a map is another way of organizing information. Teach mapping this way:

Draw a simple map form on the board that looks like the one shown here.



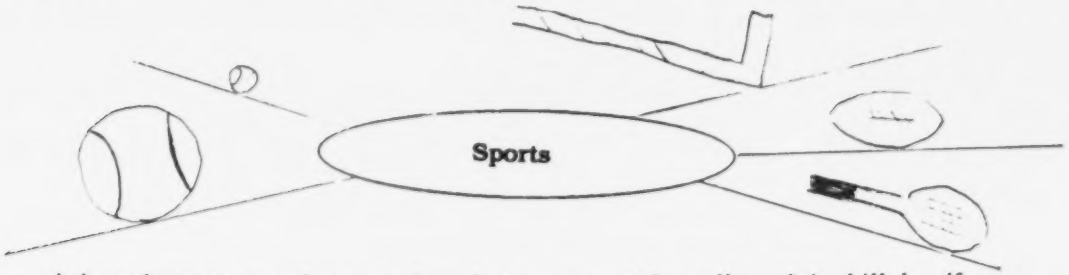
Explain that with mapping, the main topic or main idea is written in the middle of a piece of paper, an oval is drawn around it, and then the sub topics are written on lines that radiate from the oval. Give students practice mapping familiar material of the type they categorized.

Example: Map these words: *zinnia, marigold, tulip, flowers.*

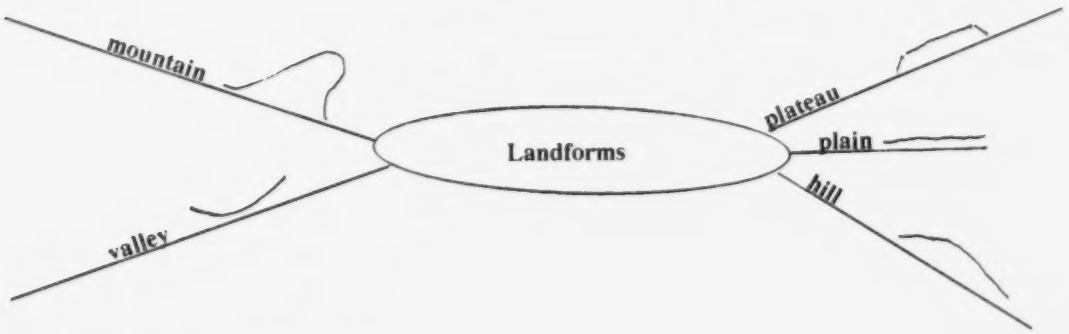


Be sure the mapped words can be read without turning the paper. (Most students prefer to hold their papers horizontally for mapping.)

Next, have students use both words and pictures to map. Explain that using more than one sense helps us remember information better. The pictures can be real representations or just something that reminds the notetaker of the idea. Ask students to map these words: *hockey, football, sports, baseball, tennis, basketball.* Model answer: (other answers are possible)



Ask students to map these words: *plateau, mountain, valley, plain, hill, landforms.*



TESTING--THREAT OR CHALLENGE

In order that students begin to see the testing situation as a challenge, no different than a game or a bowling match, they must learn to: 1. Set a realistic goal for the test; 2. Plan and work ahead for a test; and 3. Understand how tests work.

Activity 1. Choose a topic that you have been working on recently. Announce to the class that there will be a quiz on that topic a week from today. Ask the students to write down the grade they wish to achieve on the test. Then, tell them to write down the day(s), and time during which they will prepare for the test. The students must be specific.

Example: grade: 90%

time: Monday 6:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

time: Wednesday 7:00 a.m. - 7:25 a.m.

Do not collect the paper. This belongs to each student.

After the students have corrected their own quiz, ask the following questions:

*How many of you received the grade you had written down?

*Did you do better or worse?

*Why do you think that happened?

*Did you set your goals too high? Too low?

*Did you follow your study plan?

Once the students have had the opportunity to evaluate their goals, plans, and achievement, announce another short quiz for the next week. Follow the same procedure. After time, this activity not only should produce a less anxious test taker, but one who is learning to take the responsibility for evaluating his or her own actions.

HOW TESTS WORK

Familiarity with different test formats can ease learners into exams smoothly. Tests and quizzes given regularly throughout the year, will enable learners to practice this skill.

Multiple choice questions ask you to choose the right answer from a group of possible answers. The choices represent a correct answer and others based on common errors that students could make. Try this question.

Example:

$14 + 8 = 8 + \square$ What number goes in the $\square$?

(A) 6
(B) 14
(C) 16
(D) 22

What is the correct answer?_____

Explain what you think a student might have done to choose the following as the right answer.

a. 6_____

b. 16_____

c. 22_____

Here we ask students to think about the choices in the exercise. This leads to discussion of common errors. Students love to find errors in other people's work. What they do not realize is that in this exercise they have to do four different examples correctly in order to get four answers for each problem. For example, they must know that $14 + 8 = 8 + 14$. In addition, they must perform the computation, $14 - 8$ to arrive at the answer of 6, as well as $14 + 8$ to get the answer of 22.

Following this discussion, they change roles and become the test preparer by choosing the possible answers for a question.

Directions: Write four possible answers for the multiple choice question below. Include the correct answer and three others which show common mistakes that people could make.

251 - 26 + 42 = □

(A)_____ (B)_____

(C)_____ (D)_____

Again students must perform four computations, rewriting three of them in order to show common errors.

It is absolutely essential that students master study skills so that they can become the independent learners that is the goal of our system of education.

I acknowledge the help of Esther Davenport and Elaine Fitzpatrick in the preparation of this presentation.

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